

Minimum Criteria for Wilderness

Three criteria derived from the Wilderness Act of 1964 and described in the Service Manual (610 FW 4) (at www.fws.gov/policy/610fw4.html) are used to determine whether a Wilderness Study Area meets the minimum criteria of wilderness. The criteria are size, natural condition, and opportunities for solitude or primitive recreation. The following is a summary description of these criteria:

1. Size: Section 2(c) of the Wilderness Act defines wilderness as an area that "...has at least five thousand acres of land or is of sufficient size as to make practicable its preservation and use in an unimpaired condition..."
2. Natural condition¹: Section 2(c) of the Wilderness Act requires that an area qualified for designation "...generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature with the imprint of man's work substantially unnoticeable." It also states that wilderness is "...an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man..." and that it retains its "primeval character and influence." This does not disqualify areas that are not pristine, if alterations are not major and natural processes can largely be restored after designation. Generally, the natural condition criterion is met if the works of humans are substantially unnoticeable in the unit as a whole.
3. Opportunities for solitude or primitive recreation: Section 2 (c) of the Wilderness Act defines wilderness as an area that "...has outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation." An area does not need to have outstanding opportunities for both elements and does not need to have outstanding opportunities on every acre. The solitude condition is met in areas where visitors can experience nature largely free of modern artifacts, managerial presence, and other reminders of society, and where they can find a high degree of privacy and isolation. The primitive recreation condition is met in areas that provide dispersed, undeveloped recreation, generally without permanent facilities.

¹ "Natural condition" is referred to as "naturalness" in the Service Manual